NHS warned of acupuncture needles piercing lungs

The NHS has been warned to watch for acupuncture needles that can become embedded in the patients as several people suffered a punctured lung after having the ancient therapy.

The study found that acupuncture limits the activity in parts of the brain which process pain  Photo: ALAMY

By Rebecca Smith, Medical Editor
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Dozens of patients have been taken to hospital with problems following acupuncture as needles were left in patients.

An alert has been sent out to all NHS organisations warning doctors and nurses of the complications that can arise from the treatment.

The National Patient Safety Agency found there had been 95 cases between January last year and March this year related to acupuncture needles that resulted in 'little or no harm'.

However there were 34 cases classed as resulting in moderate or severe harm over eight years, including temporary loss of consciousness, fainting, and feeling dizzy.

In five cases, the patient suffered a collapsed lung which can lead to shortness of breath and chest pain.
The report from the NPSA gave an example where a patient had been given acupuncture and collapsed later that day.

It said: "The patient called to advise me that after the acupuncture she has received, she had collapsed and had breathing difficulties a short while later.

"The GP was called to her house and she was no better so went to A&E who did a chest X-ray to find that she had a pneumothorax. The doctor told the patient that this may have been caused by the acupuncture through a needle piercing the lung."

The problems were compounded in many cases because there was a lack of clarity about emergency procedures when complications arise during or after acupuncture treatment, the report said.

Patients can receive acupuncture on the NHS in certain circumstances after research showed it can be effective in the treatment of some problems, such as knee pain. However decisions over whether to fund the treatments are made by local NHS managers.

The NPSA said NHS organisations that carry out acupuncture treatments should ensure needles are not left in the patient, that it is only done in units where emergency help can be summoned and practitioners must have the proper qualifications and experience.

Nick Pahl, chief executive of the British Acupuncture Council said: "There are very few side effects from acupuncture when practised by a fully qualified practitioner of traditional acupuncture.

"Two surveys conducted independently of each other and published in the British Medical Journal in 2001 concluded that the risk of a serious adverse reaction to acupuncture is less than 1 in 10,000. This is far less than many orthodox medical treatments.

"To further reduce the risk of any potential side effects, patients should look out for a registered practitioner from the British Acupuncture Council.

"The BAcC stamp of approval means that the practitioner is an accredited acupuncturist providing the highest standard of professional care to patients, with degree level training and strict codes of safe practice which are in place to protect the patient from these sorts of incidents."

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